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UNDERGIRDING WRITING CENTERS' RESPONSES TO THE NEOLIBERAL ACADEMY

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Abstract

Writing centers are at once *a part of* and *a response to* the neoliberal academy, a phenomenon that Ryan King-White describes as a place where, "students have come to be regarded as customers, academic researchers are thought of as entrepreneurs competing for external grant funding, and the university itself more closely resembles a business model than an institute of higher learning" (223). Using that as a starting point, this essay functions part historiography, part diagnosis, and part synthesis, with three main goals: (1) redefine "neoliberalism" as a framework of critique for contemporary higher education within the United States, (2) diagnose writing centers situatedness within the neoliberal academy, and finally, (3) identify how emergent social justice scholarship—here defined as those theories accounting for access and ability, anti-racism, braver space, mindfulness, and labor—within Writing Center Studies are particularly suited as responses to neoliberalism. By expanding disciplinary praxes to examine how writing centers function within the neoliberal academy to incorporate a broader range of identities, theories, and people, writing centers can be better equipped to identify the reifying practices of our centers and develop ways to resist the harmful effects of neoliberalism that evoke these responses.

Exigence

Shortly after starting my current job, the human resources department at my institution informed employees that if they experienced back pain while working, they could request a special padding to make their office chair more comfortable. As someone who deals with frequent knee pain, my initial thought was, "What a considerate gesture on the part of my new employer!" Over the next few weeks, as I got acclimated to the campus and the job, I wondered that a more effective email would say, "If your back hurts from sitting down too much, you should take a short break." It's possible, perhaps even likely, that my employer had considered this option, but for some reason chose to recommend a solution that would keep me in my office, at my desk, working.

This anecdote is representative of what Bjarke Risagur and Mikkel Thorup identify as the conditions of the "neoliberal academy," where institutions of higher education assume, "a narrow, economistic and market-oriented understanding of 'utility' and 'relevance' . . . by, what [they] call, a *de-academization of knowledge*" (8), and what Henry Steck observed as "characterized by the entry of the university into marketplace relationships and by the use of market strategies in university decision making" (74). The *telos* of the institution is shifted from assumed goals of the investigation and production of knowledge based on student and disciplinary interest, to objectives that are more implicitly or explicitly for the benefit of preferred, external industries, ideologies, and groups.

As a natural extension of these ideas, Ryan King-White describes the neoliberal academy as a place where

> students have come to be regarded as customers, academic researchers are thought of as entrepreneurs competing for external grant funding, and the university itself more closely resembles a business model than an institute of higher learning. (223)

With these perspectives in mind, administrators, researchers, tutors, and students are faced with differing ideas where writing centers fit within the framework of the neoliberal academy, including how various stakeholders can situate their praxes and identities to respond to these conditions.

As part of the neoliberal academy, writing centers are frequently required to function according to neoliberal logics, making choices based on return on investment rather than humanitarian or educational benefits (Burns). At the same time, writing centers have long been recognized as equipped to respond and push back against neoliberal impositions. Harry Denny argues for "writing centers as sites for activism and social change (515)," while Lisa Zimmerelli points to writing centers', "rich tradition of fostering social justice work, whether in implicit, counter-hegemonic ways, or via explicit advocacy" (58-59). This complex tradition, as Bridget Draxler archives, has moved writing center researchers and other stakeholders to consider the ways that race, gender, ability, and other identifications impact and are impacted by the work of writing centers and their institutions. These emerging focuses have a substantial impact on disciplinary and local praxes, and can be kairotically positioned as ways to manage, or perhaps mitigate, the constraints and demands of neoliberalism in contemporary working environments.

This essay is part historiography, part diagnosis, and part synthesis, with three main goals: (1) redefine

"neoliberalism" as a framework of critique for contemporary higher education within the United States, (2) diagnose writing centers situatedness within the neoliberal academy, and finally, (3) identify how emergent social justice scholarship within Writing Center Studies (WCS) are particularly suited as responses to neoliberalism. What this essay *is not* is an attempt to position neoliberalism, or economic concerns more broadly, as the singular or essential issues impacting writing centers. Rather, my goal is to augment the strong foundation of institutional critiques that promote social and restorative justice in writing centers and of higher education.

Methodologically, this essay is informed by Critical Discourse Analysis, which Sandy E. Green, Jr. and Yuan Li justify as suitable for rhetorical critique of neoliberal institutions, because it "can shed light on how actors purposefully use specific discursive strategies to manipulate institutional logics, thus differentiating between disembodied discourse that constrains and embodied discourse that enables agency" (1,682). Focusing in on what "logics" mean in this usage, CDA attunes researchers to the ways institutions strategically employ language, actions, and policies in order to reframe themselves and their missions to more closely align with neoliberal ideologies.

Redefining Neoliberalism for the Writing Center

Neoliberalism is a useful artifact in critiquing higher education in the United States because it's already installed as the dominant epistemological and interpretative framework within that context. At the same time, paradoxically, because an ideology of neoliberalism permeates so many aspects of lived experience, it is effectively rendered invisible to critique. Therefore, understanding the obfuscating origins and manifestations of neoliberalism is necessary for informed response.

Neoliberalism, as currently understood, was initiated as a legitimized way for management to hedge the power of labor as a direct response to a, "global phase of stagflation that lasted through much of the 1970s" (Harvey 12). However, as David Harvey details, the creation of neoliberalism was as much a response to the expansion of union membership and the benefits of collective negotiation in the US during the preceding half-century. Like theories of capitalism or classic economic liberalism, *neo*liberalism correlated personal liberty with property rights, but it was deliberately designed to privilege the economic and personal liberty of certain classes over others.

Within this context, Lisa Duggan's framing is particularly relevant: "neoliberalism is not a unitary 'system,' but a complex, contradictory cultural and political project created within specific institutions, with an agenda for reshaping the everyday life of contemporary global capitalism" (70). Neoliberalism functions as an ideology, a set of practices, and most significant to my analysis, as intentional processes of enactment and becoming. Although neoliberalism isn't a *system*, per se, it is *systemic* and *systematic*. Therefore, a critical examination of neoliberalism would be less concerned with identifying *what is* and *what is not* "neoliberalism," and instead would seek to understand how neoliberalism impacts upon groups and individuals in discrete and intersecting ways.

Facilitation:

Contra the romanticized version of capitalism, neoliberalism isn't interested in the abolishment of shared, public resources, but in the repurposing of those resources for the benefit of private industry under the premise that private industry is better suited than public governments to meet the needs and solve the problems of a global public (Zirin). In the US, this manifests as federal and state governments actively facilitating private economic production by way of reduced tax obligations, limited regulations, and direct subsidies for infrastructure, defense, agriculture, energy, healthcare, education, and other industries (Predergast). Therefore, neoliberalism can be understood as further redefining the role of government as facilitating private industry and personal economic growth with limited oversight (Plant). Hiding that dependence is part of the epistemological process, a factor that a framework of critique attuned to neoliberalism allows us to identify (Stenberg).

Working within neoliberal logics, the tenure of then-US President Ronald Reagan ushered in an era of reduction of what have become labeled "progressive" policies, such as social services and welfare programs, corporate taxes, and government oversight and regulations of private industry. These concepts were either expelled from the US society, or the responsibility for maintaining them was shifted from public to private control. These reduction efforts were successful largely because their proponents knowingly employed language of personal responsibility, equal opportunity, free market rationalism, and callbacks to nationalist/religious historical imagery. As Genevieve Garcia de Mueller demonstrates, this approach was necessarily reliant on racial animus, bigotry, and scapegoating of an imagined other (immigrants, drugs, welfare "queens"). It is also therefore no coincidence that the emergence of neoliberalism as the dominant

political economic ideology in the United States coincided with resurgences of nationalism.

Conflation: Neoliberalism and the Body

Further complicating the relationship between the public and the private, neoliberalism conflates binary concepts like the individual and the corporation, the civic and the industrial, the citizen and the customer, and the body and the machine, so that people and businesses are positioned as hypothetical equals engaged in contractual agreements and transactions. Maddux interprets this as "making economic production a right of citizenship . . . foundational to U.S. ideals" (121), so that not only are corporations currently placed as having rights equal to and occasionally surpassing those of individuals, in order to fully actualize as citizens, people are required to participate within a given economic system *as corporations*.

This leads to a complicated network of identifications which positions individuals and corporations as having cohabitable rights, even as the playing field is continuously slanted in favor of the latter. This focus on the individual, whether in praising success and hard work, or blaming the individual for failing to be successful, arranges neoliberalism as uniquely incontrovertible, and positions critiques of neoliberalism as against a perceived common sense or expected "political and cultural truths," (St. Onge 295-296). As a result, Vicente Navarro points out, individuals that are unable to successfully participate as neoliberal agents receive reduced access to the entire neoliberal system, limiting economic advancement. In a parallel to the tautology that students need to know how to "do school" in order to be successful in college (Houp), in order to be successful within a neoliberal system, individuals must be good at the sorts of things valued by neoliberalism.

Shari Stenberg points out that neoliberalism is capable of accounting for identity and difference, but it inevitably does so on its own, limited terms, with individual identity recognized insofar as it can be commercialized and, "diversity . . . embraced so long as it is marketable, entertaining, and unproblematic" (98). Wingard says this context results in "branding" humans and their physical bodies: it reinforces preferred hegemonic identifications of identity and othering along lines of class, ability, nationality, race and ethnicity, and gender and sexuality.

Collectively, these perspectives invoke Michel Foucault's characterization of neoliberalism as a matter of biopolitics, that can "rationalize the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristics of a set of living beings forming a population" (317). A framework of biopolitics draws attention to the impacts that the neoliberal political economy has on humans and human bodies, which in turn manifests in contemporary issues such as access to healthcare, birth rates, transmission of infectious disease, and the allocation of public space. With the justification of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, for example, neoliberalism was reinforced as a systemic enactment of an ostensibly progressive concept (publicly provided health care) through traditionally conservative means (maintained private control of industry).

As a result of this dominant neoliberal framing, Stenberg contends that individual identifications and the autonomous rights of the biopolity are flattened or altogether erased in favor of a uniform, hegemonic identity defined through participation in preferred economic systems. These competing definitions reveal a fundamental limitation of neoliberalism: it seeks to flatten difference while simultaneously revealing and reinforcing the existence of difference.

Towards a Critique of Neoliberal Writing Centers

A central contradiction of neoliberalism, as well as the exigence for a social justice-based critique in writing centers, is that the neoliberal academy preaches individual success but remains reliant on overt actions of public support. This perspective will credit individual attributes such as "hard work," "genius," and "grit," while overlooking or ignoring factors of privilege and oppression. Furthermore, as all results and impacts that take place within neoliberalism are framed as deserved or fair, in instances where an individual is not successful, the blame is placed on the individual for not adequately managing their own progression or applying enough effort. This myth of neutrality perpetuates itself, and it is a function designed to absolve neoliberalism - and its enforcers - of culpability. Following the advocacy of Rebecca Hallman Martini and Travis Webster, when writing centers assume a stance of neutrality, they reify structures of oppression. With that in mind, Denny's framing of identity as, "by-products of these post-industrial economic and social shifts" illuminates how the conditions of neoliberalism made necessary the emergence of identity politics (535).

Genuine critiques of neoliberalism are often relegated—or outright dismissed—along with concepts of social justice, cultural relativism, intersectionality, identity politics, safe space, accessibility, and political correctness as postmodern performance foisted on the rest of society by the humanities and liberal arts. Although I'm less interested in validating bad faith arguments, we can be weary of Timothy Barouch and

Brett Ommen's warning that when humanities and liberal arts programs claim that their efforts are somehow outside the influence of a larger neoliberal structure, the result is a "willful ignorance of material and cultural conditions of liberal public culture that shape the expectations of students" (168). It is necessary to recognize how writing centers are culpable in perpetuating myths of upward mobility, access through standardized language/academic performance, and of an idealized "middle-class identity" that is often uncritically coded as white, standard English speaking, and heteronormative (Denny and Towle). Unless critically examined, writing centers risk designating those identifications as invisible or immaterial to their objectives and practices.

Diagnosing Writing Centers as Part of the Neoliberal Academy

When I talk about diagnosing writing centers as part of the neoliberal academy, I'm borrowing from Stenberg's concept of "repurposing," which, "involves (1) attending to and challenging the habitual or status quo, (2) drawing on and departing from these existing conditions, and (3) moving to articulate and enact new purposes" (17). This is a useful framework because it was developed to specifically designed to reveal how the purposes of writing move away from "civic engagement, personal inquiry, exploration of unfamiliar perspectives" and are replaced with "ancillary to more "profitable" ends" within the neoliberalism (8).

The shift towards the neoliberal academy is evident in how writing centers are named and perceived by the public (Hawzen, Anderson, and Newman), have modified their mission towards more explicitly-stated objectives of job preparation and economic feasibility (Bolling, Ternes and Giardina), increased their emphases on record keeping, budget management, big data, and assessment protocols (Macauley), and adopted the use of language and practices that reflects this reframing of identity and neoliberal ethos (Rifenberg). Even seemingly smaller changes, such as moving centers out of academic departments and reclassifying them as service programs, transitioning administrator roles from faculty to staff positions, renaming tutors as "consultants," and redirecting resources away from original research and towards grant procurement, are likewise attempts to imbue writing center work with an air of authority that only registers as coherent within a context that already assumes neoliberalism as its essential logic. Chris Gallagher collectively refers to these sorts of shifts as, "accountability discourses" which reframe higher education according to a "bureaucratic-institutional model" of central, hierarchical, and removed control (463).

Within this model, the neoliberal academy cannot be separated from issues of globalism and the impacts that institutions have on physical bodies. Athletic programs doubly exemplify this dynamic because they are concerned with the physical, but also because they draw stakeholders from around the world to institutions in the US, including to land grant, community, and regional institutions (Steck). Although perhaps not as explicitly, writing centers also attune to physical experiences, an awareness that is a natural extension of traditional face-to-face tutoring sessions, which place students and tutors in proximity. This extends to other issues of space and the bodies that occupy them, including interior design, locations on campus, and online access. Increasingly, writing centers are forced to consider new ways of thinking about space, such as automation, streamlining, and the outsourcing of labor to tutoring and editing services (Stenberg).

Granted, depending upon the type of institution, the extent to which this status aligns with or contradicts the university mission can vary—land grant institutions might be explicitly geared towards preparing students for vocation and employment in industries and benefit the state, whereas for-profit institutions might be explicitly beholden to shareholder returns. Proponents of this increasingly commercialized approach to higher education tend to frame neoliberalism and its effects in a sort of appeal to nature—this is the way things are, or this is the way things are going, so education better get on board and fast—and in doing so, ignore that institutions, and the conditions they create, are themselves rhetorical constructions. Furthermore, such arguments view the ethical implications of technological access, such as institutions requiring students to use preferred materials, private companies profiting from the labor of students, and student work becoming the property of those companies as logical conclusions.

These conditions cannot be read outside the anthropological context of writing centers, which have historically served people from non-traditional and under-represented groups within higher education, namely women, people of color, linguistic minorities, international students, and people of different physical abilities—demographic groups that Jennifer Wingard has noted have been particularly susceptible to having their bodies taken advantage of by neoliberal institutions. This places an ethical and pedagogical obligation on centers to situate their practices, identities, and physical spaces so as to account for the physical, emotional, and intellectual labor that takes

place in writing centers, and to provide accessibility and accommodation for students and tutors (Hitt; Smith; Macauley and Maurillo).

Each interaction between a writing center and a stakeholder leads to unique potentials regarding the intersections of language, gender identification, race and ethnicity, and physical and cognitive ability. Thought of another way, in framing writing centers (and, by extension, WCS) in terms of how they can function as responses to the neoliberal academy, I'm drawing attention to the various ways in which centers position themselves in accordance to conditions of modernity vis-á-vis consideration of postmodernity. In other words, writing centers are particularly suited to respond to the conditions of the neoliberal academy, precisely because they force the institution to confront its status as neoliberal. Invoking Denny again, writing centers illuminate how neoliberalism reveals exigence for identity politics and social justice.

Historically, writing centers have pointed to perceived lacks (time, material resources, money) in order to shape disciplinary identifications, lauding underdog status at local campuses and within the academy at large. McKinney presciently critiques this "grand narrative" response as a multifaceted rhetorical strategy, one used by writing center scholars to define themselves as outsiders working within and against a commercialized institution, while at the same time providing cover for a lack of what our colleagues in other disciplines might consider rigorous scholarship. Following McKinney's critique and others like it, writing center disciplinary discourses have partially shifted to an "output fundamentalism" of higher education that prioritizes market mechanisms that emphasize productivity and performance measures (Giroux, Seals Giroux, and King-White, 733). This framing is evident in writing centers and writing center scholarship in the privileging of quantitative and RAD research, as well as in an increased emphasis on institutional assessment, marketability of services, and positioning of centers as solutions to perceived problems, and to "streamline and standardize education" (Stenberg, 4).

These responses are typically positioned as intra-disciplinary responses *to each other*, or as responses to the conditions we're working in *as such*. In other words, they respond to the status quo on its terms, and thus can be used to reinforce that status. However, as Hallman Martini and Webster assert, "the field's emphasis on empirical and replicable aggregable data-supported (RAD) research that attempts 'objectivity' may inhibit identity-based research that recognizes how race, sexuality, gender, ability, privilege, and emotion impact our work." This sentiment is echoed by Liliana Naydan, who argues that these emphases will "inevitably devalue the professional backgrounds of writing center workers and the work that writing center workers do." Scaffolding on these perspectives, writing center scholars run the risk of overlooking the institutional factors and contexts in which those very conditions arise, including the larger societal, political, cultural, or economic structures that contribute to these contexts.

Reiterating this status of construction is important because it keeps the door open for others to offer responses based on their own worldviews and experiences. This includes incorporating scholarly lines of inquiry that focus on, such as mindfulness, anti-racism, braver spaces, and accessibility into writing center research. The underlying concepts supporting these focuses—labor, race and ethnicity, language, gender identification, class and privilege—are also concepts that are inextricably linked to neoliberalism. Furthermore, since writing centers are a part of neoliberal institutions and enact those policies, and given writing centers' disciplinary history and identifications of promoting equitable treatment and accessibility, writing center stakeholders should incorporate praxes of social justice.

Responses to Neoliberalism

Duggan articulates the necessity for incorporating identity-situated critiques because, "*Neoliberalism was constructed in and through cultural and identity politics and cannot be undone by a movement without constituencies and analyses that respond directly to that fact*" (3, emphasis in original). Yet even self-proclaimed progressive critiques of institutions of higher education can inadvertently (or, in some cases, intentionally), overlook the fact that neoliberalism interacts with and impacts upon people, their identities, and their embodiments. At the same time, because of these conditions that it sets for itself, neoliberalism invites critique, resistance, and response (Risager). Therefore, in addition to accounting for labor and class, writing center critique must also incorporate frameworks of social and restorative justice—here inclusive of concerns of race and ethnicity, language difference, gender identification, accessibility and privilege, and the intersectionality of these concepts. In this section, I will discuss how five thematic strands of writing center social justice scholarship—which I momentarily categorize as accessibility, anti-racism, mindfulness, braver spaces, and labor—can be read in terms of responses to the neoliberal academy.

Accessibility

Writing is both a cognitive and an embodied act that necessarily invokes issues of accessibility (Lewiecki-Wilson and Brueggemann, Dolmage, Babcock and Daniels). For writing centers, which are at once disciplinary places and physical spaces, centering issues of physical bodies is exponentially relevant. Responses of "accessibility" build off of interdisciplinary scholarship from areas such as medical humanities, disability rhetoric, and occupational therapy in order to develop frameworks and language for discussing and critiquing how writing centers address issues related to physical and emotional health.

Representative of the range of this significance, individual researchers have drawn attention to how writing centers can, as examples, address issues of fat studies (Smith), tutoring deaf students (Babcock), and assisting students with visual impairments (Sisk), while an entire special issue of *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* themed "Dis/ability in the Writing Center," includes research on topics such as social anxiety disorder, learning disabilities, and mental illness (Spitzer-Hanks and Garner).

Advocating for a larger disciplinary shift in thinking, Allison Hitt advises that writing centers incorporate pedagogies, physical designs, technologies, and research that are intentionally composed to "support students' different physical abilities, modes of learning, types of knowledge, and literacies." Along similar lines, others have argued that centers pay close attention to the metaphors of inclusion (Rollins) and dual identities of ability (McHarg) at play, as the language of centers can inadvertently reproduce systemic and hegemonic expectations of ability.

Reading scholarship of accessibility in terms of neoliberal response heightens how these lines of inquiry can are complicated and constrained. For example, training tutors to work with students with differing abilities takes time and resources that upper administration might prefer be allocated to other programs or services. With regards to the physicality, an emphasis on accessibility causes stakeholders to consider the designs, layouts, arrangements, and entryways of writing center spaces. Often, as a residual effect of being placed in leftover locations on campus, centers are forced to retrofit accommodations. Such approaches are not ideal or always effective, but they do align with the kind of responses expected by neoliberalism. Instead, designs and professional development that are proactive and intentional, and that include stakeholders representing the groups that centers intend to serve, should be preferred courses of action.

Anti-Racism

Writing centers are places where diverse cultures (Heard and Goins), languages (Rafoth), and literacies (Saathoff) intersect and interact. However, institutions and disciplines, including writing centers and WCS, will utilize a range of strategies to avoid confronting critique, particularly accusations of racism. Whether used intentionally or not, Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowen note, responses that rely on metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and irony to deflect critique will give the appearance of addressing racism, but can in effect work to reproduce structures of inequality. In order to counter these attempts at deflection, incorporating methodologies and pedagogies informed by critical race theory (Martinez) and anti-racism (Garcia) can center issues of race and ethnicity in ways that institutional approaches and master narratives cannot.

For example, by incorporating a method of multimodal "counter-story" "storytelling," Nancy Alvarez, et al. articulate the unique concerns of "multi-marginalized, first-generation college students" in order to argue that writing centers (and higher education, more broadly) must support "decolonizing dialogue that sanctions the production of diverse knowledge and epistemology." By bringing together issues that institutions have on raced and gendered bodies, these authors demonstrate a multifaceted response the neoliberal academy that speaks directly to the problematic core of the economic system.

Reiterating a point referenced above, writing centers have historically served people from groups that the neoliberal academy has traditionally overlooked, underrepresented, and taken physical advantage of. Therefore, by centering anti-racist approaches, stakeholders can be better prepared to preemptively address issues related to race and hopefully push back against the reproduction of institutional racism across writing center contexts: research and scholarship, pedagogy and training, and in the creation of discourses.

Braver Spaces

The embrace of the narrative of writing centers as safe spaces for diverse learners and workers has substantial evidence in disciplinary practice and scholarship (Papay, Esters). Incorporating a theory of braver space as part of a critique of the neoliberal academy can give us the tools to challenge writing center and institutional narratives. For instance, we can be moved to ask: Who made this place safe? Whose home is it supposed to feel like? Unlike most popular criticism of educational institutions' use of safe space terminology, which tend to be rooted in white male

fragility rather than serious attempts at scholarly inquiry, *intra*-disciplinary critique of safe space are largely based on challenging received truths. These critiques complicate how perceptions of safety are in fact functions of privilege based on race and ethnicity, linguistic background, economic class, and gender identification. In calling for writing centers to view their complex contexts as opportunities to "innovate and experiment" their practices and pedagogies in light of the "the influence of corporate-style management discourses," Denny draws a thread that shows how these issues of social justice are necessarily connected to issues of neoliberalism (151, 144).

Furthermore, for reasons both embraced and thrust upon them, responses themed as braver space are necessarily political in nature. Hallman Martini and Webster, in their introduction to the special issue of *The Peer Review* themed "Writing Centers as Brave/r Spaces," assert:

> As gun violence, explicit homophobia and transphobia, systemic racism and classism, and all oppressive intersections thereof, were made possible and given precedence by the elected executive administration, our educational sites aimed at creating inclusivity became increasingly more threatened.

Given that forces of hegemonic and bigoted oppression are persistently seeking to enact upon institutions of higher education, regarding a writing center as "safe" may be insufficiently passive and constrained. In response, it is vital for stakeholders to expand upon goals of social justice, and construct writing center pedagogy, assessment, and spaces that are proactive and restorative, while also accounting for individual and local contexts (Pittendrigh and Camarillo).

Mindfulness

Writing centers are at once *a part of* and *a response to* the neoliberal academy. As such, writing centers can be conflicted when it comes to how they support the student body (a metaphor that, in this usage, is stacked with meaning). Incorporating practices of mindfulness into writing center theory and practice, particularly those approaches that allow the individual to be mentally, emotionally, and physically removed from their role as labor, is uniquely suited to re-redefine the writing center space with the neoliberal academy in ways that are productive and sustainable.

In his keynote address at the 2018 South Central Writing Centers Association Conference at Central Arkansas University, Jared Featherstone explains how mindfulness practices can be used by tutors, students, and other stakeholders to develop better senses of their placements within their surrounding environments and how those placements impact their work. This talk and conference contributed to a developing body of knowledge within writing center scholarship that includes inquiry into how mindfulness can help tutors to diffuse assumed institutional hierarchies during consultations (Dueck), and how mindfulness pedagogy can augment sustained tutor training to improve tutor empathy, listening skills, and enjoyment (Mack and Hupp).

Mindfulness approaches are not only useful for promoting mental and emotional wellness, they also respond to the physical demands of writing center labor, which necessarily includes the interactions and negotiations of bodies within shared spaces. This can be read as a direct response to Wingard's main concern with neoliberalism, that it, "in very direct, material ways it harms the bodies of some of the United States's most vulnerable occupants" (77). Together, these perspectives reveal a connective thread for how writing centers can open the door for mindfulness: as neoliberalism, by definition, ignores intellectual individuality and mistreats human bodies, writing centers can respond by positioning themselves to serve the student's minds and the student body.

Labor

By investigating issues of work such as management, professional status, compensation and funding, and balancing job requirements, writing center scholarship addresses the impacts of neoliberalism in a common language or economy. In their extensive study of the material working conditions new writing center administrators, Nicole Caswell, et al. learn that many in these positions are familiar with the characterization of writing centers as under-resourced businesses. Although workload expectations can vary greatly across institutional contexts, new writing center directors feel pressure to meet their requirements as managers first, leaving little time for scholarship, teaching, or other service opportunities.

Along similar grounds, Elisabeth Buck finds that the business pressures of the job permeate to pre-service writing center professionals and graduate students who hope to someday land a coveted tenure-track position (or at least a job with consistent pay and benefits). Modeling her argument for greater accessibility to WCS scholarship, Buck tells the story of how she used part of the start-up funds at her new job to open-access publish one of her book's chapters. Studies such as these adroitly diagnose the issues impacting WCS, while also revealing the need for dealing with issues as they currently exist.

In order to avoid the reifying effects of academic hegemony Naydan argues that prominent disciplinary organizations and their conferences should incorporate, "a rhetoric of labor activism" to "revitalize shared governance and academic freedom, which are currently threatened by corporatizing forces." Although there can be material benefits to positioning writing center work in the language and terms of the neoliberal academy (for instance, ensuring equitable and competitive tutor pay is a net positive), by focusing on monetary compensation, we reproduce the systemic biases we're hoping to critique. At the same time, holding these contradictory goals in mind is necessary for writing center workers to reconstitute their identities as promoting labor practices that are embedded in social justice, while also positioning other issues of social justice as inextricable from issues of labor and compensation.

Concluding Thoughts

Institutions continue to promote an idealized version of wellness and healthy living that favors certain identifications and rewards continued productivity: a recent email I received included the click-baity subject: "How to Eat a Cheeseburger & Still Lose Weight," while a colleague at another school received a subsidized Fitbit activity tracker for enrolling in a wellness program. Although I can acknowledge that there are some potential benefits to draw from these sorts of initiatives, such as membership in community with shared goals, participation should not preclude critical scrutiny. Who has access to the tracked wellness data and for what purposes? How long, as Karen Holbrook and Eric C. Dahl predict, before those data factor into hiring and promotion decisions?

In most cases, neoliberalism is aware that it invites response, and neoliberal institutions inoculate themselves from certain types of responses. This is evidenced by institutions requiring permits to protest, designating certain physical spaces as "free speech zones," and relying on the tautology that labeling something a "private event" can justify allowing for the dissemination of hate speech on a public campus. As long as the actions can be framed within a neoliberal logic, they can be accounted for. Often, neoliberalism will co-opt the language of social justice in order to sustain itself, such as when institutions support one-off mindfulness workshops or retreats. Although these kinds of events can stem from sincere places of concern, and are often led by qualified and invested faculty and staff, the transitory nature suggests that they are exercises in performing or doing justice rather than sustaining it.

Some responses to the neoliberal academy are more adept than others at complicating the context of the neoliberal academy, such as responses that involve physical bodies doing decidedly *un*-neoliberal things in privatized public spaces. A productive illustrative instance are THE General Body sit-in protests that took place at Syracuse University during the 2014-2015 school year in response to the administration's plans to cut funding for support and counseling services (THEgeneralbodySU). Proposals like these are increasingly common and follow an economic logic of the neoliberal institution: Institutions should cut humanities and liberal arts programs because they cost money and don't lead to (the right kind of) jobs (Bolling, Gupta et al, Ternes and Giardina), Furthermore, they should reduce funding for support services because those services are only used by some students, students who would otherwise not be able to cut it in the university (Caplan).

So, just as neoliberal governmental policy frames dissent as undeserving of citizenship, the neoliberal academy frames dissent as undeserving of participation in higher education. But responses like those made by the THE General Body are effective precisely because they break from the expected neoliberal logic. They force institutions to confront and reconcile the potential hypocrisies of their neoliberalism by drawing attention to the identities and bodies of those impacted, and in doing so, unironically reframe the conversation on what many institutional mission statements claim to advocate for: the best interests of the student.

The tendencies and ramifications of the neoliberal academy are not always negative, even if the root concept is wholly indifferent to justice. As a rule, I disagree with any implication that because institutions of higher education have become marketized, writing centers and programs should unilaterally embrace market-based discursive identifications and logics. And yet, I can find Daveena Tauber's advocacy for preparing tutors to be independent writing consultants to be a convincing argument for writing centers to seek out different ways to establish professional identifications.

Although not exclusive within institutions of higher education as places where different disciplines, cultures, and abilities intersect, writing centers can be identified as particularly situated to respond to neoliberalism as a systemic, globalized, and physical phenomenon. Writing center praxes that account for accessibility, anti-racism, mindfulness, braver spaces, and labor, can be read as kinds of responses to

neoliberalism. As a way of downplaying the collective significance of these ideas, institutions will compartmentalize responses of social justice as only addressing specific needs, such as anti-racism being invoked only when an issue of explicit racist violence occurs. This is a category error, and it is doing the work of reinforcing the hegemonic hierarchies that neoliberalism seeks to sustain. Acknowledging the existence of intersectionality as a baseline assumption is necessary for sincere critique of the neoliberal academy. At the same time, the social justice themes discussed here must be addressed on their own terms. The goal should be to embrace *both* the intersections *as well as* the unique contexts provided by each perspective.

This comprehensive approach contradicts neoliberal logics, and that is the point. According to Duggan, "as the ideas of Liberalism become common sense, they also work to *create* or *remake* institutions and practices according to their precepts" (5, emphasis in original). In doing so, neoliberalism impacts writing centers by redefining what our very work, spaces, and selves mean and are capable of. By expanding our praxes to incorporate a broader range of identities, theories, and people, we can be better equipped to identify the reifying practices of our centers and to develop ways to resist the deleterious effects of neoliberalism.

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